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Data show widespread mining impacts

Officials map 1,645 miles of streams affected

By [Peter Marcus](#) Herald staff writer

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Courtesy of Environmental Protection Agency

The opening to the Gold King Mine, which is about 10 feet wide and 15 feet high, where some 3 million gallons of toxic wastewater gushed out Aug. 5.

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The opening to the Gold King Mine, which is about 10 feet wide and 15 feet high, where some 3 million gallons of toxic wastewater gushed out Aug. 5.

State health officials Thursday released a map that shows water-quality impacts to 1,645 miles of streams, possibly caused by mining activities.

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The data come as the Durango community continues to recover from a devastating error by a crew contracted by the Environmental Protection Agency that sent an estimated 3 million gallons of mining wastewater into the Animas River on Aug. 5. The EPA-contract crew caused the spill while excavating the abandoned Gold King Mine near Silverton. The crew had planned to investigate necessary reclamation activities.

The map and data released by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment on Thursday show that the Gold King Mine is far from the only problematic location facing the state, resulting from historic mining activities all across Colorado.

Water-quality impairments include the presence of metals or a change in pH caused by a combination of mining impacts and underlying natural geology. When the Animas turned a mustard-yellow color from the spill, the water initially tested positive for spikes in lead, arsenic, cadmium, aluminum, copper and calcium. The pH also plummeted.

Lax regulations from the days of the mining boom in the state – dating back to the late 1850s – have allowed for contaminated waters to build up. The locations are primarily in historic mining districts, including 230 draining mines within the Colorado Mineral Belt. The belt runs from the mountains of Southwest Colorado to around the middle of the state, near Boulder.

There are 47 draining mines with active water treatment; 35 that are under investigation or being remediated; and 148 that likely impact water quality with no active water treatment.

Improvement efforts include source controls, like bulkheads, waste pile and tailing removal, active and passive water treatment, and other stream and ecosystem restoration projects.

From 2009 to 2014, the Colorado Division of Reclamation Mining and Safety spent more than \$12.3 million – from a variety of federal, state and private funding sources – on mining-related water-quality improvement projects.

“Colorado is making progress to address the legacy impacts from historic mining operations, but additional funding and resources would speed that process considerably,” said Mark Salley, spokesman for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

One avenue officials can explore is declaring Superfund status, which injects large amounts of federal dollars into cleaning up the nation’s uncontrolled hazardous waste sites. When that was proposed for Gold King Mine, some in the Silverton community opposed the idea, suggesting that it could leave a black eye on the town.

But other communities that have pushed for Superfund status have blossomed into vibrant communities, including parts of Leadville, Idaho Springs and Breckenridge, to name a few.

Answering a question during a community meeting at Rotary Park in Durango on Tuesday, Gov. John Hickenlooper, a Democrat, said Superfund status should be included as a solution, but only with local stakeholders at the table.

“We’re going to look at everything, and I think everything is on the table.” Hickenlooper said. And he added, “Obviously a local community has to

have a loud voice in that.”

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“Out of the long list of nature's gifts to man, none is perhaps so utterly essential to human life as soil.”
Hugh Hammond Bennett